

VOICES IN THE ECHO CHAMBER: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA SHAPES FEMALE IDENTITY IN PATRICIA LOCKWOOD'S *NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS*

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ABSTRACT

*This article examines Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) through Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic concepts of the mirror stage and the gaze, read alongside *Critical Cyberculture Studies*, to explore how social media functions as a public gaze that both constructs and destabilizes contemporary female identity. Through a qualitative close reading of key passages, the study analyzes the unnamed protagonist's immersion in the "portal" as a digital analogue of the mirror stage, wherein identity is continuously produced through algorithmic feedback such as likes, comments, and viral circulation. This process generates a fragmented subjectivity shaped by visibility, surveillance, and competing online discourses. As the narrative shifts from digital immersion to intimate familial crisis, the collapse of the portal's authority exposes the limits of virtual self-construction and enables a tentative re-grounding of identity in embodied experience. The article argues that social media simultaneously amplifies and disciplines female voice, operating as a site of performative self-fashioning, competitive visibility, and constrained resistance. By extending Lacanian psychoanalysis into algorithmic and platform-mediated environments, this study contributes to feminist media theory and literary studies by demonstrating how women's voices are shaped, circulated, and muted within contemporary digital echo chambers.*

Keywords: *Mirror Stage, Gaze social media, female identity, digital culture, Cyberculture*

Introduction

The rise of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the ways in which identity, voice, and subjectivity are produced and perceived. Digital spaces now function as sites of constant visibility, where individuals are not only seen but continuously evaluated, circulated, and reinterpreted through algorithmic systems. For women in particular, social media operates as a contradictory space that promises visibility and agency while simultaneously intensifying surveillance and fragmentation. Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) offers a compelling literary exploration of these tensions by depicting a female protagonist whose identity is deeply entangled with her online presence.

No One Is Talking About This, published in 2021, is a novel by Patricia Lockwood that explores the chaotic and fragmented nature of the digital world and its impact on human connection and consciousness. The book tells the story of a woman who is a popular social media influencer and travels around the world speaking at events about the online world. However, her life takes an unexpected turn when her sister becomes seriously ill, and she is forced to confront the limitations of the digital world in the face of real-life tragedy. Through her experiences, Lockwood delves into the ways in which we navigate the tension between the digital and the physical, and the challenges we face in finding meaning and connection in a world that is increasingly dominated by technology. The novel is a poignant and thought-provoking reflection on the complexities of our digital age, and the ways in which it both enriches and impoverishes our lives.

This article argues that Lockwood's representation of the "portal" operates as a Lacanian mirror stage intensified by algorithmic visibility, producing a fragmented yet socially

regulated female subject. The objective of the research is to critically evaluate the portrayal of female identity and voice in *No One Is Talking About This* and how it aligns with or deviates from contemporary feminist discourse on social media and digital culture. To achieve the above mentioned aims and objectives, Jacques Lacan's theory of the Gaze and Mirror-Stage in his book *Écrits: A Selection*, alongside with the interdisciplinary field of Cyberculture Studies with reference to David Silver and Adrienne Massanari's *Critical Cyberculture Studies* will be used to validate the research argument.

Using the theoretical frameworks of Jacques Lacan and Cyberculture Studies presented in *Critical Cyberculture Studies*, the article aims to draw an analysis of the novel in terms of identity formation and its relation to digital media. The main questions that this article aims to answer are; To what extent does social media acts as the "public gaze" for its users and how does it help in understanding the relationship between digital media and female identity? How does the protagonist's engagement with social media reveal the larger cultural anxieties and contradictions surrounding digital technology and its impact on human experience? And, How does the protagonist's relationship with social media in *No One is Talking About This* reflect the larger societal tensions between individual expression and communal connection in digital space?

Jacques Lacan was a French psychoanalyst who made significant contributions to the field of psychoanalytic theory. One of his most influential concepts is the "mirror stage", which he introduced in his seminal essay, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." (Lacan 1111) The mirror stage is a crucial period in the development of the self, occurring around six to eighteen months of age, when a child develops a sense of self-identity by recognizing their reflection in a mirror. According to Lacan, this recognition is a complex process that involves both identification and alienation from the self, as the child comes to understand that their reflection is a separate entity from themselves.

Another important concept in Lacan's work is the notion of the "gaze". In Lacanian theory, the gaze refers to the power dynamic that arises in social situations where one person is the object of another person's gaze. The gaze is not just a physical act of looking, but rather a complex and often fraught relationship between the seer and the seen. Lacan argues that the gaze can create feelings of both pleasure and anxiety, and that it plays a central role in our understanding of identity and subjectivity. (Lacan 1121)

Lacan's mirror-stage theory proposes that infants develop a sense of self through their recognition of themselves in a mirror or other reflective surface. According to Lacan, this process occurs between the ages of six and eighteen months, when infants become aware of their own bodies as separate from their environment and from other people. Lacan argues that this experience of self-recognition is crucial for the development of the ego, which is the part of the psyche that mediates between the internal and external worlds. The mirror-stage also plays a significant role in the development of the symbolic order, which refers to the system of language and cultural symbols that shape our social identities and interactions. (Lacan 1111)

Several scholars have examined Lacan's mirror-stage theory from a feminist perspective, arguing that it reinforces traditional gender roles and the patriarchal order. For example, Luce Irigaray, a French feminist philosopher, criticizes Lacan's theory for assuming that the mirror reflects a unified and coherent self, which reinforces the idea of a stable and

fixed identity. Irigaray argues that this idea of a unified self is problematic for women, who are often marginalized and fragmented by patriarchal power structures. (Berg 53)

Lacan's concept of the gaze refers to the power dynamics that are inherent in the act of looking. According to Lacan, the gaze is not just a neutral or passive act of observation, but rather an active and often aggressive gesture that reinforces social hierarchies and power differentials. The gaze is closely related to Lacan's idea of the "Other," which refers to the external world and other people who are not part of the self. Lacan argues that the "Other" is always present in our perception of ourselves and our interactions with others, and that the gaze is a key way in which the "Other" is imposed upon us. (Lacan 1116)

The concept of the gaze has been widely studied in media and cultural studies, particularly in relation to the representation of gender and sexuality in visual media. Laura Mulvey, a British feminist film theorist, argues that the gaze is a central element in the construction of gendered subjectivity in cinema, where male protagonists are typically positioned as active agents and female characters are objectified and passive. Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze" has been influential in feminist media studies and has led to a critical reassessment of traditional Hollywood cinema. (Mulvey 806)

Lacan's Mirror Stage describes the infant's first recognition of a coherent image of the self, which simultaneously creates an alienated "I" (Lacan 1111). The gaze, for Lacan, is the symbolic power that subjects experience when they become objects of another's look, generating pleasure and anxiety (Lacan 1121). In the novel, the protagonist's constant monitoring of likes and comments functions as a digital mirror-stage, while the pervasive audience embodies the Lacanian gaze.

Cyberculture Studies is an interdisciplinary field of research that explores the impact of digital technologies on human culture and society. As we continue to rely more and more on technology for communication, information, and entertainment, it becomes increasingly important to understand the ways in which our online and offline worlds intersect and shape each other. Cyberculture Studies draws on a wide range of academic disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, media studies, philosophy, and computer science, to investigate topics such as online identity, digital communities, virtual reality, and the politics of the internet. This field of study is constantly evolving as new technologies emerge and our relationship with them continues to evolve. As such, it is a rich and fascinating area of research that offers insight into some of the most pressing questions of our time, including how technology is changing the way we think, communicate, and relate to one another.

Cyberculture studies provide a critical framework for understanding how digital technologies mediate identity, power, and social interaction. Rather than celebrating the internet as a utopian space of free expression, contemporary cyberculture scholarship emphasizes the material, ideological, and discursive structures that shape online life. In *Critical Cyberculture Studies*, David Silver and Adrienne Massanari argue for an approach that foregrounds power, inequality, and cultural politics within digital environments, challenging earlier celebratory narratives of cyberspace as inherently democratic.

A central concern within critical cyberculture studies is the relationship between visibility and subject formation. Digital platforms function as spaces where users are compelled to render themselves visible through posts, images, metrics, and ongoing participation. This visibility, however, is not neutral. As Silver and Massanari emphasize, online spaces are structured by platform architectures, moderation practices, and algorithmic systems that

privilege certain voices while marginalizing others. Identity in cyberculture is therefore not freely constructed but negotiated within regimes of surveillance, circulation, and audience response. This framework is particularly relevant to Lockwood's depiction of the "portal," which operates as a space of constant exposure and evaluation.

Feminist interventions within cyberculture studies further complicate questions of digital visibility by examining how gender shapes online participation and representation. Scholars have shown that women's voices in digital spaces are frequently subjected to intensified scrutiny, appropriation, and harassment, even as platforms promote narratives of empowerment and self-expression. Massanari's work on online toxicity and platform governance demonstrates how seemingly neutral digital infrastructures often reproduce existing power hierarchies, allowing misogynistic discourse to flourish while placing the burden of resilience on marginalized users. Within this context, female visibility becomes a paradox: increased exposure may offer recognition but also invites regulation, distortion, and silencing. (Silver and Massanari 20-22)

Critical cyberculture studies also highlight the discursive nature of online environments. Digital platforms are sustained through continuous flows of language; tweets, comments, memes, and viral phrases, that shape collective meaning-making. Silver argues that cyberculture must be understood not simply as technological innovation but as a cultural system in which discourse produces social norms and identities. This emphasis on discourse aligns closely with Lockwood's stylistic choices in *No One Is Talking About This*, where fragmented language, repetition, and irony mirror the rhythms of online communication. The novel's form itself reflects the cognitive and affective conditions of cyberculture, reinforcing the idea that digital subjectivity is produced through participation in circulating discourse rather than stable self-expression.

Importantly, cyberculture studies reject the notion that online and offline identities exist as separate domains. Instead, scholars emphasize continuity between digital practices and embodied experience. Silver and Massanari stress that online interactions are deeply embedded in everyday life, shaping emotional responses, ethical judgments, and interpersonal relationships. (Silver and Massanari 55-60) This perspective is crucial for understanding the narrative shift in Lockwood's novel, where the protagonist's immersion in the portal is disrupted by familial tragedy. Rather than positioning the digital and the physical as oppositional, the novel reveals how digital habits, language, and affect persist even in moments of profound grief.

Lacan's theories of the Mirror Stage and the Gaze offer a productive framework for understanding how digital media shape contemporary subjectivity. The mirror-stage produces a self that is both unified and fragmented, a subject who recognises an image as "I" while simultaneously experiencing alienation. The gaze, in turn, introduces both pleasure and anxiety through the awareness of being seen. In Cyberculture studies, scholars extend these psychoanalytic mechanisms to what has been termed the "public gaze" of social media platforms, which actively participates in the formation of gendered identities. In his article, Bharath Ganesh illustrates how the same infrastructures that encourage self-presentation also sustain extremist "digital hate cultures." Such communities operate through swarm-like structures, exploit gaps in platform governance, and rely on coded language, enabling them to evade moderation. These collective practices generate a powerful form of the gaze, one that

validates hostile identities and reinforces a toxic relationship with the Lacanian “Other.” (Ganesh 31)

Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* is a novel that explores the intersections of identity, technology, and contemporary culture. The novel follows the protagonist, a woman who spends most of her time on the internet, as she navigates through the digital landscape and its effects on her identity and sense of self. The book delves into themes such as the impact of social media on human interaction and the formation of identity, the power of language in shaping social norms and values, and the complexities of the human experience in the digital age. Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* fictionalizes these dynamics. The protagonist's influencer identity is repeatedly mirrored back to her through likes, comments, and viral circulation, enacting a digital version of the mirror-stage that fractures her sense of self. The novel's metaphor of the “portal” represents the algorithmic systems that filter, amplify, and monitor content, transforming the platform into a techno-Lacanian eye that both constructs and disciplines subjectivity. The narrative shift toward familial crisis ultimately collapses the portal's gaze, allowing the protagonist to momentarily reintegrate her fragmented identity and revealing the limits of algorithmic control over the self.

Lockwood's novel has been widely praised for its innovative approach to exploring the relationship between technology and human experience. Many scholars and critics have discussed the novel's relevance to contemporary issues related to technology, culture, and identity. An important aspect of Lockwood's novel is the power of language and discourse in shaping social norms and values. The protagonist's engagement with the internet and social media highlights the ways in which language is used to shape our understanding of the world and our place within it. This theme is also relevant to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, which emphasizes the role of language in shaping subjectivity and the construction of the self. (McAlphin)

Lockwood's novel follows an influential social-media influencer whose life unravels when a family tragedy forces her to confront the limits of the “portal” (the online sphere). While the book has attracted popular reviews, scholarly analyses remain scarce. This gap motivates a psychoanalytic-cultural reading that interrogates how the digital public gaze mediates female self-construction.

This article adopts qualitative research method to analyze Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* through a Lacanian and Cyberculture perspective. It is an interdisciplinary research since it combines literature with psychology and cyberculture studies. The primary text used for this research is *No One Is Talking About This* by Patricia Lockwood. The secondary texts are Jacques Lacan's *Écrits: A Selection* and *Critical Cyberculture Studies* edited by David Silver and Adrienne Massanari.

Lacan's theory of Mirror Stage will help in formulating how the Symbolic acts as a reflection of one's soul and how it helps shaping one's identity. The concept of Gaze in the book will be used to identify how digital media acts as the Public Gaze in contemporary society. Cyberculture Studies will be used to examine how social media plays a major role in shaping the psyche and thought process of an individual.

The book is divided into two parts; the first focusing on the internet culture, while the second focuses on the family tragedy and private grief and suffering the protagonist endures. The unnamed protagonist is showcased as someone who has affection for digital media and actually uses these platforms. Patricia Lockwood writes about how there is always a discourse

on social media, how everyone is trying to out-nuance each other. Therefore, the book includes a lot of vignettes and social media sized quips. The book is wholly a contrast and juxtaposition between the ultra-public sphere of social media, where there is always a discourse, and the deeply personal reality that she wakes up to every day where “no one is talking about this”. (Lockwood 99)

The internet proves to be a whole oasis of discourses. While surfing through the portal, the protagonist comes across this story of women luring the Nazi hunters to woods in order to kill them. This makes her realize that there is this whole discourse on the internet, where no one knows if it is true or not. For her, “the power of socialism” becomes the only way to come to terms with herself. (Lockwood 10) This further showcases how much she is being controlled by the voices on social media. She, further, begins to associate herself with what she finds on the internet. After learning about a new species of tree frog on the internet, she begins to relate herself to them because “it wants to be left alone.” (Lockwood 29) Her isolation and alienation can be seen as a result of her addiction to the internet, however, instead of coping with that, she begins to relate herself to what she finds on the internet. This, thus, becomes her source of identity formation. She begins to shape her identity according to what she reads on the internet, and what others say on the internet. Lockwood's protagonist experiences a sense of alienation and fragmentation as she navigates through the digital world, struggling to reconcile the multiple identities and voices she encounters. This is illustrated in her use of fragmented language and disjointed syntax, which reflect the chaos and noise of the online environment.

Furthermore, her experiences on social media highlight the ways in which the female voice is constantly influenced and manipulated by the multiple voices and discourses on digital media. For instance, her tweets are often recontextualized and appropriated by others, shaping her identity and public persona in unpredictable ways. Her voice is snubbed and is, alternatively, given another voice by those people on the internet, whom she barely knows about. This, further, showcases how “Public Gaze” becomes a mean of shaping your personality, and eventually, your identity.

Lockwood's portrayal of the protagonist's online interactions with other women underscores the complex power dynamics at play in female relationships on social media. The protagonist is often caught in a cycle of competition and comparison with other women, as she tries to negotiate her place in the online world and assert her own voice and identity. The protagonist's experiences with social media also reveal the potential for digital platforms to serve as spaces of resistance and subversion, as she connects with other women and engages in acts of solidarity and collective action. This is illustrated in her participation in online activism and her use of social media to amplify the voices of marginalized groups.

“It was a mistake to believe that other people were not living as deeply as you were.” (Lockwood 7) This comment by the protagonist highlights a common human tendency of assuming that our experiences, emotions, and thoughts are unique, and that others cannot comprehend or relate to them. The narrator reflects on her past belief that her own experiences were somehow more intense or meaningful than those of others. This flawed perspective created a sense of isolation and disconnection from the world around her. The quote suggests that such a belief is a mistake because it undermines the shared human experiences that bind us together. The novel explores the ways in which social media and digital communication can create an illusion of uniqueness and isolation, leading to a sense of disconnection from the

world. The narrator learns that everyone has their own deep and complex inner lives, and that recognizing this can help us connect with others and find meaning in our own experiences.

In her debut novel, *No One is Talking About This*, Patricia Lockwood used contrasting tones of irony, sincerity, sweetness, and darkness. The book's protagonist, an unnamed social media influencer, became famous for her viral post asking if a dog can have a twin. However, her speaking engagements are often met with criticism and skepticism, as some question the value of her contributions to society. However, she feels content that this particular phrase will get stuck in their minds. This, further, showcases how things on social media become a part of our conscious minds. Lockwood's protagonist faces the daunting task of writing about "the portal," or the digital world, without falling into the trap of old-fashioned prejudices. Despite the challenge, she manages to capture the essence of this virtual world in the first half of the novel. This virtual world brings out a whole change in her demeanor. It brings out a new voice in her that was never there before. This establishes how social media helps in shaping your personality. However, throughout her healthy interaction with digital media, there is always a sense of "Public Gaze" and the fear of being judged. Consequently, in the second half, her perspective shifts dramatically as she confronts the harsh realities of life, leading to a profound transformation.

In the midst of the protagonist's obsession with the digital world, a sudden text message from her mother shatters her virtual reality. "Something has gone wrong," her mother writes. "How soon can you get here?" (Lockwood 82) The message becomes a harbinger of the devastating reality that awaits her back home, where her sister's life is in peril due to a complicated pregnancy. The protagonist's detachment from the real world is overpowered by her love and concern for her sister and her unborn child. Lockwood uses this moment as a turning point in the novel, emphasizing the dangers of becoming too consumed with the virtual world and losing touch with the emotional connections that make us human. Through this tragic event, Lockwood highlights the importance of balancing our online and offline lives and finding a way to integrate them into a coherent and meaningful whole. Amidst the looming due date and the sorrowful atmosphere that has enveloped the family, the protagonist finds solace in the communication with her sister. They exchange memes and watch TV shows like "River Monsters," an extreme angling series. The novel's recurring refrain, "For whatever lives we lead, they do prepare us for this moment," resonates with them. (Lockwood 93) The chaotic world of the internet has given the sisters a shared language that brings them comfort in their time of need. Lockwood asserts that this language, no matter how absurd it may seem, is valid and truthful. The protagonist does not turn to social media for solace when faced with the family emergency; rather, she becomes fully immersed in it. This defies the expectation that someone as addicted to the portal as her would sneak away to check her phone. Lockwood makes it clear that our humanity is not completely absent in the portal, but rather that it is necessary to step away from it at times. The protagonist's realization that she can transcend the portal and her previous belief that someone else was writing her thoughts highlight the potential for growth and self-awareness in real-life experiences. Thus, social media not only acts as a tool that shapes one's personality through comments or posts, but rather, it becomes a medium to realize oneself, and come to terms with who you actually are.

One key theme discussed in the paper on *No One Is Talking About This* is the role of social media in shaping identity. Lockwood highlights how social media platforms have become a central part of people's lives and how they influence our sense of self. She explores

the idea that social media allows individuals to create and curate their digital personas, leading to a fragmented and often inauthentic sense of self. This moment illustrates how the protagonist's identity is not merely reflected but continuously reassembled through what Lacan would call misrecognition, now mediated by algorithmic feedback loops.

Conclusively, Patricia Lockwood's novel *No One Is Talking About This* and Lacan's theories of mirror stage and gaze provide insightful perspectives into the ways social media impacts identity formation and voice of the female gender. Through the analysis of the novel's protagonist, a social media influencer, we see how the endless stream of information and voices on digital media can shape one's sense of self and contribute to a sense of disconnection from reality. The Lacanian concepts of the mirror stage and gaze further help to explain the psychological processes at play in the formation of identity and the effects of social media on this process. The article demonstrates that digital platforms simultaneously construct and destabilize female identity, positioning Lockwood's novel as a feminist meditation on subjectivity under algorithmic spectatorship.

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